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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 004008

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SUBJECT: KUWAIT FREEDOM AGENDA: PRIME MINISTER'S SON
ADVISES QUIET REFORM PUSH

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Shaykh Nassar Al-Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, the son of the Prime Minister and an advisor to the premier, advised the Ambassador to push the U.S. political reform agenda quietly in political circles rather than publicly. The Ambassador questioned Shaykh Nassar on the intentions of Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah in the upcoming legislative session. End summary.

Electoral Reform: "We Should Address It and Tackle It"

12. (C) On reform, Shaykh Nassar said that he was in favor of a reduction in electoral constituencies from the current twenty-five to five or ten, which he maintained would reduce corruption and vote-buying. "That really can push Kuwait forward," Shaykh Nassar said. (Note: Under the current electoral system, parliamentary candidates have needed less than 1,000 votes in some districts to win a seat in the National Assembly. Recent elections have sparked numerous allegations of tribal caucuses that pre-selected candidates destined for victory, as well as wholesale vote-buying. End note.) Shaykh Nassar said that three years ago, he had written a report calling for a reduction from 25 to ten electoral districts, and promised us a copy.

13. (C) The Prime Minister was in favor of such a reduction, Shaykh Nassar indicated, but that the issue was now in the hands of the National Assembly, where discussions but no action occurred during the last legislative session. Shaykh Nassar explained that the Prime Minister delivered his reduction plan to Parliament, and left it there. "That's not right," Shaykh Nassar said of such hands-off behavior. "I think we should address it and tackle it."

"It Will be Much Stronger if You Whisper it"

14. (C) The Ambassador asked how he could best assist the GOK to enact political reforms, which he said included not only the reduction in constituencies but also the legalization of political parties and the passage of a press law that liberalized libel law and the rules for newspaper ownership. Shaykh Nassar, while acknowledging that that U.S. support for reform was helpful, cautioned against public statements by the Ambassador and other U.S. officials. He contended that U.S. support was far more effective expressed privately, as it was during the campaign for women's political rights. "It'll be much stronger if you whisper it," Shaykh Nassar advised. "Let Shaykh Sabah take the credit," he added.

Getting Information About Reform into the Mix

15. (C) In order to encourage discussion about reform and provide good advice to decision-makers, the Ambassador suggested a nine-month "Distinguished Lecturer" series, to be sponsored by the American-Kuwaiti Alliance (AKA), a private group of prominent Kuwaiti businessmen dedicated to improving bilateral relations led by Yousef Al-Ebrahim, the Prime Minister's Economic Advisor and a former Minister of Finance, and strongly supported by Shaykh Nassar. Such an effort would propel debate about reform, harness outside expertise and move the agenda forward. Shaykh Nassar seemed willing to entertain the idea, asking at the meeting's conclusion, "Where do we go on this?" Ambassador subsequently passed the idea in writing to other American-Kuwaiti Alliance figures.

"He Has Accepted Me as an Advisor"

. (C) Shaykh Nassar, a liberal, pro-reform businessman and world-reknowned collector of Islamic art, began the meeting by clarifying his status as a formal advisor to his father, the Prime Minister: "He has accepted me as an advisor." Shaykh Nassar explained that together with Economic Advisor Al-Ebrahim, he was busy organizing the Prime Minister's team of advisors into a coherent structure. He acknowledged that at times the Premier had received conflicting advice from various sources, but said that he was working on formalizing the advising process and making it more efficient.

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